

S. L. Pandey's

**'SAMKARA AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE':
AN EVALUATION**

I

This paper aims at a critical discussion of Dr. S. L. Pandey's claim,* that Śamkara's philosophy is not only not opposed to science, 'Śamkara's doctrine of Nescience, can be regarded as the philosophy of science par-excellence.'

He gives three arguments in favour of the charge, that 'Śamkara's philosophy hampers the progress of science. His paper seems to aim at answering these charges. He agrees with the opponents of Śamkara's philosophy that according to Śamkara the world of science is a world of māyā or avidyā. He believes that the doctrine of māyā indicates that no scientific theory is a genuine description of that which is real. In his own words "Śamkara considers philosophy of nature on the analogy of a myth and just as there is no real object or person described in a myth, so there is no real object described in the science of nature,' (p. 76). He adds that the ontological status of both myth and science is the same. They are simply mental constructs. Curiously enough he thinks that this view represents not only Śamkara's doctrine of māyā, but also modern view of scientific theory as a conceptual scheme, developed to explain the observed phenomena of nature.

Actually there is nothing common between Śamkara's conception of avidyā and the modern view of science except the phrase, mental constructs and even this phrase has vastly different meanings in the two contexts. For Śamkara, not only scientific theories (which did not exist in his times), but even the referents of these, i. e. the empirical objects and events, are

* See S. L. Pandey's paper, Śamkara and the Philosophy of Science, I. Philosophical Quarterly, Vol. IV. No. 1, October 1976, pp. 75-76

avidyā, or mental constructs, or mere modifications of speech.¹ A few modern scientist philosophers might well have developed some such idealist theory of the universe, but this is definitely not the scientific view of the world. Scientific theories may well be mental constructs but not the reality to which they refer. No scientist would ever agree to Dr. Pandey's equation of scientific theories with mythology. A myth is a pure and free creation of the mind, a scientific theory is not. It is developed after a very careful organisation and systematisation of the observed data which it seeks to explain. A scientist claims that not only his theories explain the external world, its objects, forces and events, the former truly represent the latter. Science does not subscribe to the view that Real is a hypothetical something, transcendent to and beyond the grasp of scientific knowledge.

Dr. Pandey's paper is too vague and general and we fail to distinguish any single well developed argument in it. From science as mental constructs he jumps to Śaṅkara's view (?), that philosophy of nature is a model that points to Brahman. He adds, that like a philosopher of science Śaṅkara has tried to show that every phenomena is essentially related to that First Principle and that the former cannot be differentiated from the latter, (p. 77). A few things have to be noted with regards to the above affirmation. First of all, the above statement makes two assertions, that all phenomena are related to Brahman as their First Principle and that the former cannot be differentiated from the latter. Now, they are quite different assertions, though Dr. Pandey seems to treat them as identical. Secondly, the view, that all is māyā and that all scientific or empirical knowledge is just mental constructs, is not the same as the view that the entire universe is derived from, based on and points to Brahman, the First Principle. Śaṅkara seems to have suggested both the views in different contexts. Dr. Pandey should have made up his mind as to which view is the truly representative view of Śaṅkara, instead of treating them as

if they were identical. Empirical knowledge is either just mental construction which veils, and not reveals, the Reality; or it points to Reality and in that case it cannot be mere māyā or avidyā. Avidyā, or that which veils, cannot lead to the Reality which is veiled by it.² Also, if the world is māyā or a mere illusory appearance (vivarta) of Brahman, there is no question on relating every phenomenon to the First Principle. As to his remark, that according to Śaṅkara there are no gaps in the universe, it is true to this extent, that all Vedāntins accept Śaṅkara's view point to explain the facts within nature. But the nature as a whole is still māyā or mithyā. Potter's designation of Advaita as a leap philosophy is quite correct, as in it there is no smooth transition from the world of māyā to Brahman. Of course, all these diverse strands are related in Śaṅkara's philosophy. But we fail to find any clear statement of the views of Śaṅkara in Dr. Pandey's paper. As it is, the two statements, that the world is māyā and that it is derived etc. from Brahman, seem to be presenting quite different standpoints and so they both cannot be used as proofs of Śaṅkara's philosophy being a philosophy of science.

In the very same passage he compares Śaṅkara's view of Brahman with Spinoza's '*natura naturans*,' whose creative role present every where for all time. In the first place, this is not what Spinoza meant by '*natura naturans*' Secondly, though Śaṅkara affirmed Brahman being the origin or cause of the universe, Brahman's creativity, for Śaṅkara, is at par with the jīva's bondage and the world's phenomenal appearance. All of them are the creations of avidyā and thus Brahman's creativity is not its essential nature.³ Lastly, even if, for the sake of argument, we agreed that Śaṅkara believed in the creativity of Brahman, what has that to do with a scientific view of the universe?

Dr. Pandey is right when he equates avidyā with empirical knowledge. But he is very much off the mark when he tries to equate the Advaita theory of knowledge, as one which sublates the

false knowledge, with the modern view of scientific hypothesis as one which stands to be corrected by later developments. On the one hand, in Advaita view there is the certitude that all avidyā is necessarily sublated at the rise of knowledge, with its implicit corollary, that avidyā includes not only empirical knowledge, but the entire phenomenal world, which is also often affirmed, (though mistakenly), to be sublated at the rise of true knowledge.⁴ On the other hand, on the part of the scientist, is the affirmation of the truth and utmost reliability of scientific theories as explanations of the world. Instead of hoping for the sublation of his view point by some transcendental knowledge, the scientist's utmost attempts are directed at vindicating his views by carefully planned experimentation etc. Even if a certain view is refuted, it involves no depreciation of the entire realm of empirical knowledge as avidyā. What is more, any view that takes the place of the old reputed view is as much a part of what Śaṅkara calls the world of avidyā as the earlier one. Advaita view of valid knowledge has a necessary reference to illusory perception. Valid knowledge is that which sublates the previous false or illusory knowledge.⁵ In science there is neither any reference to previous illusory knowledge, nor to any future transcendent knowledge. Science is a progression, not from falsehood to truth, but from limited to more and more comprehensive truths. Very few scientific theories are completely refuted. They are corrected and later supplemented by later proofs and developments. And this later correction has nothing in common with Advaita conception of sublation of avidyā by vidyā.

He has quoted Śaṅkara to the effect that through falsification of previous theories the most probable theory is obtained. Śaṅkara might have used this approach in his argumentations against his philosophical adversaries. But his decided view was very much against reasoning or argumentation as a means of ultimate knowledge. Curiously Dr Pandey himself has quoted the famous passage of Śaṅkara deprecating the capacity of reason to arrive at the

Truth, as a well reasoned argument is always liable to be replaced by another well reasoned argument.⁶ One is surprised at the naiveness which finds this anti-rational attitude as a proof of the philosophy of science. There is nothing common between the Advaitic approach to reason and empirical knowledge and what he has quoted as Popper's criterion of scientific theories. The verification, or even refutation, of all scientific theories implies a complete faith in the reliability and validity of scientific methods and reasoning: For Śaṅkara the world may be 'avidyā-kalpita nāma rupa', for science it is not. While an Advaitin always aims at transcending the empirical knowledge, a philosopher of science has no such intentions.

Dr. Pandey has very briefly answered one other argument against Śaṅkara, that he has depreciated philosophy of nature as of no use to a knower of Brahman. In answer, he refers to those passages of Śaṅkara where the latter has asserted that all cosmological enquiry is a means to the knowledge of Brahman. A more patient *honest* study of these passages would reveal, that Śaṅkara's purpose is not to appreciate or commend cosmological enquiry, but to affirm that the only value of such an enquiry is being instrumental to a knowledge of Brahman.⁷ He had no reserves about the secondary worth of such enquiries. Similarly, Dr. Pandey quotes from Sureśvara regarding usefulness of cosmological enquiry. But it should be remembered that the central theme of Sureśvara's chief work *Naiṣkarmya Siddhi*, is the contention that all empirical knowledge and experience are sublated at the rise of knowledge. And Śaṅkara has clearly said in his *Adhyāsa bhāṣya*, that all knowledge of Śruti, including of course all cosmological enquiry, comes within avidyā.

Moreover, there is a world of difference between the cosmological enquiries of the Śruti, which directly point to Brahman as the source etc. of the universe and modern science which has no such aim. Whereas the Śruti texts can have a certain instrumental

value for a knower of Brahman, modern science, and nature philosophy based on it, can have no such value. Science studies and aims at a limited explanation of natural phenomena. And it is obvious that for science such a study is more or less an end in itself. Science never seeks to establish a hypothetical Absolute on the basis of its various discoveries. So far we have found not a single argument in favour of his contention and conclusion at the end of the first section, that ' In this way Śaṁkara has given a philosophy of science which makes a critical reflection upon the explanations of science. ' (p. 79).

II

In his second section Dr. Pandey refers to Śaṁkara's analysis of the categories of knowledge and contends that his views are similar to the views of modern scientists. To a limited extent this is quite true. Not only Śaṁkara's philosophy, but the entire Indian philosophic tradition, has shown itself very much at home with the vast spatio-temporal dimensions and other truths about the universe, discovered by modern science. Dr. Pandey is right, therefore, when he points out that Śaṁkara's use of the categories of space, time and changing diversity (jagat) together resembles the modern concept of space-time-continuum. But any such comparison loses its appeal when it is carried too far. That is why, Dr. Pandey is unconvincing when he first gives Śaṁkara's view of motion, as belonging to a body and having its source in a transcendental cause, and concludes that, Śaṁkara's theory of motion takes space, time, matter and nature into consideration. In short, ' motion and matter are inseparable. ' He adds that this theory is in accord with the modern theory that takes into consideration the electro magnetic fields etc. (p. 80). We fail to see any such wide ranging implications in Śaṁkara's simple statement, meant to prove the causality of Brahman and not the inseparability of matter and motion .

As to the concept of causality, he affirms, that for Śaṅkara there is no difference between cause and effect. Any student of Śaṅkara would know that by the above, Śaṅkara meant to emphasise the completely derived, dependent and secondary existence of the world.⁸ Śaṅkara definitely did not mean that there is no difference in the ontological status of the cause, Brahman and effect, world, as Dr. Pandey has asserted (p. 80). The ultimate (pāramārthika) and basic character of Brahman and the secondary or even illusory character of the world are the fundamental tenets of Advaita, which no amount of reasoning can interpret otherwise.

The Advaita conception of causation cannot, by any flight of imagination, be compared to the modern conception of functional dependence. The Advaita conception of 'vivarta' implies at the same time the essentially derived, dependent and even illusory character of the effect and the unconditional superiority and reality of the cause.⁹ On the other hand Russell's conception of causation (quoted by Dr. Pandey), is nothing but observed regularity of sequence, apparently denies any ontological superiority and priority of the cause to the effect. In fact, both Hume and Russell developed their conceptions of causation in opposition to the conventional view of causation which was exactly similar to Śaṅkara's view. We are surprised, then, at Dr. Pandey's conclusion, that Śaṅkara's doctrine of non-difference or identity expresses this very regularity of sequence and that Śaṅkara believed in functional dependence instead of causal connection! The doctrine of Satkārya-vāda, accepted by all Vedantins as an explanation of natural events, emphasises a special potency in the cause which gives birth to the effect.¹⁰ The very idea which is denied by Russell's conception of mere regularity of sequence.

Dr. Pandey further observes that the modern conception of causation has done away with the concept of substance and so has Śaṅkara's doctrine of māyā. He concludes, that the theory of māyā thus gets confirmation from the elimination of substance, as

the theory of vivarta gets from the theory of functional dependence (p. 81). Now, the theory of m \ddot{a} y \ddot{a} declares the insubstantiality or illusoriness, not only of causes, but of all qualities, forces and the entire phenomena. On the other hand, the rejection of a hypothetical substance by science, over and above all these qualities and forces, has no reference whatsoever to the general unreality or falsity of the entire world of phenomena. Similarly, the unreality of the effect, expressed in the conception of vivarta, has no parallel in the scientific conception of causation. Actually, there is not a single argument in Dr. Pandey's paper in favour of his contention. He seems to have picked up a few phrases, as mental constructs and functional dependence, and argues from their use by both Śaṁkara and modern science for the sameness of the two doctrines. But not much reasoning is needed to point out that these conceptions have vastly different meaning in the two different contexts of Śaṁkara's Advaita and modern science.

III

The purpose of the paper is not clear. Is it to prove that Śaṁkara's doctrine of Ne-science is a philosophy of science par excellence? Or is it an humbler claim that Śaṁkara's philosophy does not hamper the progress of science? If the first, then no philosopher on earth can prove that Śaṁkara's philosophy is a philosophy of science. The two are entirely divergent in their purposes and approach while for Śaṁkara all true philosophy is essentially a means to the realization of mokṣa.¹¹ and includes the rejection of the entire empirical knowledge and experience as not Self,¹² a philosophy of science expresses an entirely different approach. It seeks the knowledge and explanation of the empirical world, and that too without any reference to any transcendent reality, an end-in-itself. Had Dr. Pandey started with the humbler claim to prove that Śaṁkara's philosophy does not hamper the progress of science, he could have very easily proved it. But we don't think he has been able to do even that in his paper.

Dr. Pandey's failure seems to be due to his apparent inability to appreciate a fundamental distinction in Vedānta. As early as Katha Upaniṣad, the seer differentiated between the empirical knowledge, which is directed outwards, and the ultimate knowledge, found within the soul.¹³ In Śaṅkara this distinction is given a still more central place. There is a corollary to it which should not be forgotten either. According to it, both the empirical and the ultimate knowledge are more or less independent of each other. All means of knowledge are valid in their respective fields, says Śaṅkara. In its particular field, each means is supreme and cannot be contradicted by citing the testimony of another means of knowledge (pramāṇa).¹⁵ The judgment as to the world being māyā is made from the stand point of transcendental knowledge. From that point of view there cannot be any meaning in science or philosophy of science. So long as one is at the empirical or perceptual level of consciousness, all these have meaning, but then the world is not māyā at this level. Thus, Śaṅkara's transcendental knowledge, according to which alone the world is māyā, can never be a basis of a philosophy of science. The above has no bearing to the problem as to whether or not Śaṅkara's philosophy hampers the progress of science, which we think it does not.

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Notes

1. S. B. on *Chāndogya Up.* VI. 1.4
2. Advaitins are uncompromising as to the need of an unconditional transcendence of all avidyā or discursive knowledge before true knowledge can arise. See *Siddhānta Leśa Saṅgraha* III. 34
3. S. B. On *Brahma Sūtras* II. 1, 9, 14 etc.
4. Ibid II. 1.23, III. 4.16 etc and S. B. on *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Up.* I. 4.7, II. 4.14

5. *Siddhānta Leśa Saṁgraha* I. 72-81 *Pañca Pādikā* I. 46 etc.
6. S. B. on *Brahma Sūtras* II. 1.11
7. Ibid I. 1.2, I. 4.23, II. 1.6 etc.
8. "When a thing cannot exist without some other thing, the relation between the two is that of non-difference."
S. B. on *Brahma Sūtras* II. 1.14 also Ibid I. 4.6; II. 1.13 etc.
9. Ibid II. 1.7, 11, 13, 14 etc.
10. Ibid II. 1.24, etc.
11. Ibid I. 1.1; S. B. on *Mūndaka* Up. Introduction.
12. S. B. on *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* Up. I. 4.7 *Upadeśa-Sāhasri* II. 2.3, II. 6.2 etc.
13. 'Wide apart and leading to different ends are these two, ignorance and what is known as knowledge' *Katha* Up. I. 2.4
14. Ibid II. 1.1
15. Śāṅkara bhāṣya on *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* Up. II. 1.20